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SUBJECT: AZERBAIJANI REACTION TO KOSOVO'S INDEPENDENCE

REF: A. BAKU 00146

1B. BAKU 00129

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Donald Lu for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) The GOAJ's initial response to Kosovo's declaration of independence is to reject Kosovo's decision. MFA spokesperson Khazar Ibrahimov's February 18 statement was the first official reaction to Kosovo's independence. In the statement, Ibrahimov characterized Kosovo's independence as a "unilateral" violation of international law and said that the GOAJ would not recognize Kosovo's independence. Ibrahimov also emphasized that Azerbaijan's Kosovo policy would be based on Azerbaijan's distinct national interests (a point Deputy Foreign Minister Khalafov separately made to DCM, ref a), suggesting that Azerbaijan's policy would not be influenced by either U.S. or Russian policy. Anar Jahangirli (MFA Security Affairs Department officer responsible for Nagorno-Karabakh policy) reiterated Ibrahimov's public statement in a February 19 conversation with emboff. Jahangirli stressed that Kosovo's independence was a "unilateral" violation of international law. Jahangirli also noted that the MFA would issue a more fulsome reaction to Kosovo's decision on February 19 or 20.

12. (C) Commenting on the general public's response to Kosovo's independence, Fariz Ismailzade -- MFA Diplomatic Academy officer and a respected local commentator -- told us Azerbaijanis are "not happy" with this development. Ismailzade -- like several other commentators with whom we spoke -- said the Azerbaijani public is deeply skeptical that Kosovo's independence will not serve as a precedent for NK's independence and reinforce Armenia and NK's position regarding Azerbaijani territory. Ismailzade suggested Kosovo's independence will reinforce the public's belief that Azerbaijan should adopt a "tougher stance" toward NK as Baku cannot expect to rely on outside actors -- such as the U.S. or the EU -- to stand for the principle of territorial integrity. Another respected local commentator, Ilgar Mammadov, underscored that while the U.S. and some European countries may state that Kosovo is a unique case and not a precedent, Kosovo's independence sets a clear precedent favoring self-determination over territorial integrity.

Media Reaction

¶3. (U) The Azerbaijani media has given broad coverage to Kosovo's declaration of independence and the subsequent international reaction. All TV stations covered MFA spokesman Khazar Ibrahim's remarks at a February 18 press conference in which he stated that Azerbaijan will not recognize the "illegal," unilateral decision, nor does Azerbaijan consider Kosovo a precedent for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The newspaper headlines echoed these remarks: "The Separation of Kosovo from Serbia is Illegal," EXO, February 19; "Kosovo's Independence Has Divided the World in Two," YENI MUSAVAT, February 19.

¶4. (U) Most political commentators here were unified in their view that given Azerbaijan's own separatist conflict, the country should be cautious about recognizing Kosovo. While disavowing any relevance for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, former Presidential advisor Vafa Guluzade claimed that Kosovo's independence had demonstrated that "U.S., not Russia, determines the world order" and that Azerbaijan has been correct in pursuing a pro-Western foreign policy. Rasim Musabeyov denied any similarity between Kosovo and Karabakh and, given the Kosovo experience, Ilgar Mammadov cautioned the GOAJ against accepting international peacekeepers in Karabakh. Vugar Seyidov noted on the popular news portal Day.Az that in only one day 16 states had already recognized Kosovo's independence and another 37 had declared their readiness to do so; meanwhile, not a single country had recognized Nagorno-Karabakh's "independence" in over 17 years.

Comment

¶5. (C) Azerbaijan continues to view Kosovo's independence strictly through the prism of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. The GOAJ is deeply worried that international support for Kosovo's independence could lead to international recognition of the so-called "Nagorno Karabakh Republic" or otherwise affect the NK peace process. For this reason, we do not anticipate that Azerbaijan will recognize Kosovo's independence any time soon and expect the GOAJ to stick to its argument that Kosovo's declaration violates international law. The GOAJ likely is in a "wait-and-see" mode: monitoring how many countries will recognize Kosovo and gauging how strongly the Azerbaijani public will react to developments. As Foreign Minister Mammadyarov told the Ambassador, the GOAJ is likely to remove its peacekeepers from Kosovo (ref b). In our meetings with GOAJ officials and the general public, the Embassy is continuing to reiterate that Kosovo's independence stems from a unique set of circumstances and does not set a precedent. We also are grateful for the Department's additional statement for Post that seeks to delink Kosovo's status from NK's status.

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